

## 1. IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The LWSR is of statewide and national significance for the ecological and recreational values it provides.

The Riverway was established by the DNR Board and the Legislature by Act 31, 1989 (Chap 30.40 Wis. Stats.) to provide for the long-term protection and management of the outstanding scenic, recreational, and natural resource values of the lower river corridor. As are most DNR managed properties, the Riverway's lands are open for traditional outdoor uses including hunting, fishing, trapping, walking, nature study, and berry picking. Other compatible recreational uses may be allowed by the property's Master Plan if those uses do not detract from the primary purpose of the property.

While the Riverway's state owned lands are managed by the DNR, the scenic quality of the Riverway is more broadly protected by scenic easements and by building development and forest management performance standards and aesthetic regulations. The performance standards and aesthetic regulations are administered by an independent state agency, the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board.

### **Social-economic Context**

The river corridor is largely rural, rugged terrain with a mix of agricultural and forest land. A number of villages and small cities front the lower river along its 92 mile length. Most of the region is comparatively sparsely populated, Dane County being the one exception. Local residents have personal connections to the river. It forms a strong thread in the local identity.

Population levels of the western half of the region are projected to stagnate over the next 10 to 20 years. In the eastern counties; Dane, Sauk, and Iowa; growth is expected to be strong. In fact, Dane County has been the fastest growing county in the state.

### **Recreation: Use, Demand, Significance and Capability**

Compared to the northern two thirds of the state, southern Wisconsin has only a small amount of public land and a higher population density. Being the largest public property in southern Wisconsin and one of the largest in the state, the Riverway provides abundant public open space for a broad spectrum of recreational activities ranging from hunting and fishing to hiking, wildlife watching, and horseback riding. Unlike state parks, the Riverway has few developed facilities; however, some picnic, camping and other facilities are provided by local parks along the length of the river. Abundant opportunities for more developed recreational uses, including camping with RVs, are provided at several state parks; Tower Hill, Wyalusing, Governor Dodge, and Devils Lake.

River recreation, such as canoeing and sandbar camping and fishing in particular, are a major draw for people from across the state and upper Midwest. An estimated 13 million people live within a three hour drive of some portion of the LWSR.

According to Riverway managers, there is demand for additional boat access sites along the entire length of the river, and many exiting sites are in need of improvement as well. There is demand for more developed picnic sites and more developed shore fishing sites and accessible

piers and hunting blinds. The existing equestrian trails need improvement as well. Also, there have been requests for the development of a hiking trail running the length of the property from Sauk City to the Mississippi. Providing for recreational uses sustainably on the Riverway is not without its challenges due to the steep bluffs, wetlands, sandy soils, and abundant sensitive resource sites.

There are a number of recreational supply shortages in the region (SCORP 2005-2010). While the Riverway already provides for many of these opportunities, there may be opportunities for increases in some categories. The regional shortages include backcountry and walk-in camping, boat launches and other water access, natural areas, picnic areas, horse trails, and hiking trails.

Population trends will also help shape future recreational use demand. Overall, hunting and fishing pressure and recreational opportunity demand will grow with the expanding population of southern Wisconsin. Additionally, the ballooning over-65 population will put pressure on demand for more passive recreational opportunities, like wildlife viewing, and easier access to some sites.

### **Ecological Significance and Capability**

The LWSR lies within the Western Coulee and Ridges Ecological Landscape. Of the 34 natural communities in this landscape for which there are “Major” or “Important” opportunities for protection, or restoration, or management, 25 of them are represented on the LWSR. The Riverway’s ecological importance is further underscored by the fact that the property covers less than 1% of the Ecological Landscape, yet supports 47% of the rare species and 71% of the natural communities (with major management opportunities) that are known here. The protection and enhancement of rare and endangered species and natural communities is a primary mission of the department.

The Wisconsin Wildlife Action Plan places the LWSR within three Conservation Opportunity Areas of continental significance. The Nature Conservancy recognizes the area as a critical “functional landscape”. Of particular importance for this recognition is the large river system with a diversity of exceptional natural communities providing a continuum of habitats from river; to wetland; to open, dry habitats; to woodland; to moist cliffs supporting a long list of bird, fish, mussel, reptile, amphibian, and insect Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

More specifically, 44 rare plants (four State Endangered) are found on the LWSR. Particularly significant are those plant species associated with Floodplain Forest, Southern-mesic forest, Oak Barrens, and oak woodland/Oak Openings. Of special note is that the Riverway holds one of the most extensive Floodplain Forests in the state. The Riverway is well known for eagles, but it is a significant refuge for many other rare animal species as well. The property harbors over 37% of animals on the state Threatened & Endangered list. Included are 121 rare animal species (LWSR Biotic Inventory and Analysis, DNR 2011), three are Federally listed or are candidates for listing, 15 are State Endangered species and 21 are State Threatened species. The LWSR plays a critical role in conserving several animal taxa in particular. They are forest interior and grassland birds; herptiles; fishes; aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates; and bats. This large number of rare animals from numerous taxonomic groups reflects the overall diversity of good-quality habitats that are present throughout the property. Of particular importance for conserving rare plant and animal species on the Riverway is maintaining or restoring older forests, open wetlands, aquatic features (such as springs, oxbow lakes, and sloughs),

Floodplain Forests, Southern Mesic Forests, Oak Barrens and Dry Prairie, oak woodland and Oak Openings.

Twenty-eight “Primary Sites” have been identified on the Riverway as being worthy of protection or management. These “Primary Sites” contain relatively undisturbed, high-quality, natural communities; provide important habitat for rare species; offer opportunities for restoration; provide important ecological connections.

The LWSR is a well-known bird migration corridor, hosting hundreds of thousands of birds in spring and fall, from songbirds to shorebirds, water birds and raptors. In the winter, raptors such as rough-legged hawk, American kestrel, sharp-shinned hawk, northern goshawk, and sometimes short-eared owl concentrate in the river valley. Large populations of bald eagles, diving ducks and gulls occur in winter, often congregating below the Prairie du Sac dam when the river freezes elsewhere. Numerous wooded bluffs, including Ferry Bluff, Lone Rock Bluffs and Sugarloaf are important roost sites for wintering bald eagles. Since 2002, during the spring and fall migrations, whooping cranes have used the wetlands of the LWSR for foraging and roosting.

## **Conclusions**

The Lower Wisconsin and its adjoining lands are of continental ecological significance; having one of the most significant assemblages of natural communities and habitats for rare species in the Upper Midwest.

The Riverway is one of the state’s most important properties for reptiles and amphibians; forest and grassland birds, rare fish, mussels, and other aquatic invertebrates. Because of the unique circumstances on the LWSR, conservation opportunities to support Floodplain Forests and rare plants are perhaps greater here than anywhere else in the state. The sandy terraces in the Riverway provide one of the best conservation opportunities in Southern Wisconsin for rare plant species associated with Oak Barrens and Dry Prairie. The LWSR offers a significant opportunity to manage a landscape mosaic of diverse habitats at a level found on few other state-managed properties. The connection of upland forests with bedrock outcrops of Dry Prairie to the expansive lowland forests and wetlands of the river valley bottom are an exceptional opportunity for landscape level management.

The Lower Wisconsin River is one of the longest reaches of free flowing rivers remaining in the Midwest. Its broad waters filled with islands and sandbars and are flanked by largely undeveloped banks and bluff lands making this waterway a truly unique and prized recreational resource. When one also considers the wide variety of upland recreational opportunities available, it is easy to see that the LWSR plays a unique role in the region and state’s recreational picture and see why it’s of regional and statewide importance.